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ABSTRACT

This study examined English teenagers' community involvement. Participants were all 14-16-year-old students in 3 large public schools (rural, urban, and suburban), none of which had service learning as part of the curriculum. Over 1,000 students completed questionnaires that examined regular and one-time involvement in community service activities over the past year; views on volunteering and campaigning; and ways the students became involved or reasons they did not become involved. The questionnaires also asked about the students' involvement in religious and youth organizations and their views on traditional political parties. Researchers conducted 100 individual interviews with students to investigate these issues in-depth. The interviews included both volunteering and non-volunteering students. The results of the study were as follows: most students had given money or time to a charitable cause at least once; students were involved in a range of activities; only 13.5 percent were members of a group campaigning for something; there was a low level of commitment to involvement in formal politics; about 12 percent were involved in regular, long-term voluntary activities, and all 12 percent cited positive outcomes from their activities. The most common factor among involved students was having a family member or friend already involved in some kind of activity. Religious beliefs and membership in organized youth groups were also important factors. (SM)

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AERA Annual Meeting 1998, San Diego, California.

Title: Challenging the Image: service learning among British adolescents.

Authors: Katie Player. Debi Roker. John Coleman: Trust for the Study of Adolescence.

Session title: S-40-2 : Examing the curriculum and effectiveness of Service Learning.

Preamble

The purpose of the presentation was to report on a research project by the Trust for the Study of Adolescence, in Britain, looking at the community involvement of British teenagers. It was hoped to add to the session by providing an international context to the discussion, and that our finding that three quarters of British teenagers are already involved in community activities would challenge the pervasive image of adolescent apathy.

The Trust for the Study of Adolescence is an applied research organisation, which seeks to stimulate research and dialogue about this stage of human development. Apart from its work on adolescent altruism, recent projects have focused on teenage parenthood, young offenders, adolescent communication, and teenage suicide and self-harm.

The presentation was structured as follows:
The background to the study and the British situation.
The sample and methodology of the study.
Problems that we encountered.
The main findings, grouped into four categories:

i) What sort of activities had the young people been involved in?
ii) How many were members of campaigning or political groups?
iii) How many were regular volunteers, and what were there
iv) Who were the regular volunteers and why?

Conclusions.

1. The background to the study and the British situation.

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"... we know much less about adolescents helping, sharing and comforting behaviour than those of children or adults' (Eisenberg, 1990)

A few minutes was spent sketching the British situation, and defining a few terms. In Britain there is no curriculum requirement, at any age, for moral education, citizenship studies or service learning. For some years there have been calls to include practical social and moral education in the National Curriculum alongside "academic" subjects. Where it does exist, service learning, or community service as it is called in Britain, is organised school by school, with much depending upon the commitment of individual teachers.

The authors were particularly concerned to challenge the negative view of young people which prevails in Britain. This view asserts that young people are alienated from their communities, apathetic and uninterested in participating in prosocial activities.

Much of the research that has explored adolescent altruism has been limited methodologically, generally using experimental and laboratory techniques (for example Lowe and Ritchey, 1973; Suls, Witenberg and Gutkin, 1981); relatively few studies have been based in applied settings. One area which has been investigated is young people's participation in voluntary community service activities.

Much of the research, both in America and Britain, has focused on the psycho-social outcomes for school-aged young people participating in community services (see for example the Special edition of the Journal of Adolescence, 1994). In Britain, community service activity has been shown to improve self-image, enable a young person to work as part of a team, provide a greater understanding of the needs of others and of public services, and promote a belief that individuals can make a difference (Cross, 1986; Centre for Citizenship Studies, 1992).

We are aware that there has been much work on these issues in America, and would be glad to hear of any particular studies which may add to our research.

The British research has been, however, limited in scope and often anecdotal. Our objective was to provide statistical evidence of the community service activities of the young people, whilst allowing them to express their views and beliefs. We wished to discover the scope of the activities that young people were already involved in, and how they regarded community service.

We decided to investigate a broad range of community service activities, focusing on the ideas of "volunteering" and "campaigning". We defined "volunteering" as any activity which was engaged in by choice, outside of school or family commitments, by which the young person gave time to aid the community, for no monetary gain. Examples from the study include:
working to raise funds for a national charity.
helping younger children in the school with their reading.
helping an elderly neighbour with shopping.
doing administration for a local amateur soccer team.

We defined "campaigning" as an activity where the young person sought to change something in the local or wider community, again for no monetary gain. Examples include:
Attending a protest march against animal cruelty.
Writing letters for a human rights organisation.
Leafleting for a political party.
Lobbying for a pedestrian crossing on a busy road.

2. Sample and Methodology.

The authors' research comprised a large scale questionnaire survey of all 14-16 year olds (the last three years of compulsory schooling) in three large state funded schools. None of the schools had service learning as part of the curriculum. The schools were chosen to provide a geographical spread across England, and included an inner-city, suburban and rural setting. One school had a long history of community involvement, one had recently begun to investigate how to involve pupils, and one had made no moves to do so.

Over 1,000 questionnaires were completed, during class, with all questionnaires completely confidential. The questionnaire asked about regular, and "one-off" involvement in community service activities over the past year, views on volunteering and campaigning, how the respondent had become involved, or why they had not. The questionnaire also asked questions as to the young people's involvement in religious and youth organisations, and their views on traditional political parties.

100 individual interviews were conducted with young people in the schools, which investigated these issues in more depth. The interviews included a group who were

involved in volunteering and campaigning, and a group who had little or no involvement.

3. Problems encountered.

We encountered several problems with the sample. The sample was not representative of the population ethnically. The majority of the respondents who were from ethnic minorities were from one school. This made it difficult to generalise some interesting results. Also, perceived difficulties in accessing volunteering opportunities were difficult to generalise as we only had one school of each geographical type.

We were aware of the problems inherent in collecting self-report data. We were careful to take a very neutral tone in the survey, and to ensure confidentiality, to compensate for the possibility of over-reporting. In the end, the interview stage of the project uncovered marked levels of under-reporting of activity, particularly amongst the young men.

4. Results.

The results of the study will be broken down into four sections:

i) What sorts of voluntary and community activities had the young people been involved in over the last year?

The young people were questioned as to any "one off" or occasional activity they had been involved in. The results here were striking.

90% had given money or time to a charitable cause at least once.
35% had helped younger children at their school in a organised way.
47% had campaigned about something in their local area.

These results supported the hypothesis that young people were involved in a whole range of activities, but that their involvement was being under reported. It also showed the potential for many more young people to become involved in a more regular way. This supposition was supported by the positive view of community service expressed by those who were not themselves involved regularly, and their willingness to be so involved in the future.

ii) How many young people were members of campaigning organisations or political groups?

13.5% of the group were members of a group that were campaigning for something. There was, however, a low level of commitment in terms of involvement in formal politics. It would appear that the young people were not apathetic as some commentators had suggested, but committed to many different issues, and expressing this commitment in less formal and traditional ways. Many were involved in "single issue" campaigns. Examples included:

Human rights organisations
Ecological campaigning organisations
Animal rights and anti-vivisection organisations
Third world campaigns
An anti-landmine organisation.

It is interesting to note that during the project, new public order legislation made some of the campaigning activities reported illegal. Several of the young campaigners reported frustration and a determination to continue with their activities despite this. Some were involved with groups campaigning to stop the legislation.

iii) How many were regular volunteers, and what were their experiences of this?

12.6% of the sample were involved in regular, long term voluntary activities. This was very encouraging, and far higher than the negative anecdotal evidence suggested. The activities these young people were involved with were very varied and covered traditional definitions of community service, as well as community and political campaigning, particularly in the area of the environment. The activities and groups worked with included:
environmental groups
the elderly and terminally ill
conservation work
HIV/AIDS projects
third world charities
the homeless

The regular volunteers all cited positive outcomes from their activities in terms of

both practical and social skills. These ranged from computer use to public relations, from problem solving to public speaking.

iv) Who were the regular volunteers and campaigners?

This was the key question we wished to answer; what marked out the young people who were already involved in community service from those who were not? The most common factors were having a family member or friend already involved in some kind of activity. There was little difference between the effect of family and peer influence. The young person would not necessarily become involved in the same kind of activity; the importance was seeing the behaviour modelled as acceptable and positive. This finding has direct relevance to those seeking to encourage adolescent prosocial activity.

Other factors which were shown to be important were religious belief, belonging to some kind of organised youth group, such as the Scouting movement, and a greater chance of supporting one of the political parties. Young women were more likely to be involved than young men, although there was intriguing evidence of "hidden" activity by young men, who either discounted their involvement, or deliberately lied about it to avoid censure from peers and family.

The factors cited by those who were not involved were not knowing how to become involved, fear of censure from parents or peers, fear of racial assault (in respondents from ethnic minorities) and time and transport issues. There was a level of mistrust amongst all respondents about proposed schemes that would "force" young people to undertake "voluntary" work, either as part of the school curriculum, or upon leaving school.

5. Conclusion.

This is a groundbreaking study for Britain, which provides evidence of young people's involvement in community activities in a variety of ways. It also provides important evidence as to the factors which encourage their involvement, and their views on this issue. It emphasises the importance of modelling these activities, and providing readily accessible opportunities for involvement for those who wish to encourage more young people to become involved in their communities.

It raises important questions as to the relevance of traditional definitions of voluntary and campaigning activities when applied to groups such as young people.

Differences in definitions of what constitutes "voluntary" and what "service" can leave adults seeing teenagers as apathetic and uninvolved. Our findings refute this. Adolescents in Britain are involved in serving their communities, but not necessarily always in ways that adults find appropriate. It may well be time to re-evaluate those definitions.

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